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Inferiority and bereavement: Implicit psychological commitments in the cultural history of Scottish psychotherapy

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The author has argued that psychoanalytic psychotherapy was seen in Scotland as a way to purify Christianity of supernaturalism and moralism, and to propel the faith in a scientifically rational and socially progressive direction. In making this historiographic claim, certain disciplinary protocols are followed, such as the symmetry postulate and a deprecation of reductive psychohistorical explanation. Nonetheless, the contemporary historian of psychotherapy is a psychologized subject whose historical practice rests upon a complex, prereflective background of psychological presuppositions.

Keywords: Scottish psychotherapy; inferiorism; discursive bereavement; Christianity; historiography.

Introduction

For over a decade, I have been working in various ways on the history of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy, in the Scottish context. My research on this topic was originally motivated by an interest in the recovery of neglected local intellectual traditions. But I subsequently discovered that Scotland was particularly informative as a case study in the adaptation of psychotherapeutic ideas and practices to a distinct cultural and national context. The history of psychotherapy in Scotland shows its theoretical and practical adaptation to a context which was unreceptive to the Freudian debunking of religion, and which chose instead to graft psychotherapy into an ongoing constructive critique of the Christian religion by the human sciences. The stimuli of both this special issue, and a recently contracted monograph on the topic, have encouraged me to reflect on some of the methodological issues raised by this line of research, particularly the place of psychological and psychotherapeutic ideas in my historical practice.

A brief, introductory summary of my work on Scottish psychotherapy may serve to orient readers. A few years into my research, a definite – and perhaps surprising – hypothesis

began to emerge about the meaning of Scottish psychotherapy for its leading practitioners. Psychotherapy was seen as an ally to Christian apologetics – as a way to purify Christianity of supernaturalism and moralism, and to propel the faith in a scientifically rational and socially progressive direction (Miller, 2008). Rather than follow the reductive Freudian critique of religious belief and practice, Scottish practitioners tended to ally psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with the rational reconstruction of Christianity by the human sciences, including textual criticism (Miller, 2009, pp. 5-7), social anthropology (Miller, 2008, pp. 39-42), and existential philosophy (Miller, 2009, pp. 7-14). Psychoanalysis was to purge religion of the inessential accretions identified by Freud, such as wish-fulfilment and comforting regression, leaving the way clear for a psychologically reformed faith that emphasised social relations of love and fellowship. An intellectual alliance was created between the Scottish churches and Scottish psychotherapy (Miller, 2007, 2015), and found practical expression in the work of celebrated figures such as the pioneering psychoanalysts Iain D. Suttie and W.R.D. Fairbairn (Miller, 2008, 2014) and the Christian philosopher John Macmurray (Miller, 2007). Scottish Christianity thus endured, and transformed itself, by drawing on the alliances that it had built in the twentieth century with psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Even as Scotland rapidly secularized in the 1960s, psychotherapeutic discourses and practices offered a (perhaps temporary) safe haven for Christian life-narrative patterns. Such psychotherapeutic continuation of so-called ‘discursive Christianity’ (Brown, 2009) appeared in the career of the radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing (Miller, 2009, 2012), as well as in the life and work of less celebrated but nonetheless historically informative exemplars such as the Edinburgh-based psychotherapist Winifred Rushforth (Miller, 2015), and the spiritual-cum-psychotherapeutic milieu that grew up around her (Miller, 2013). Rushforth, for instance, spoke freely and frankly of psychotherapy as a means to miraculous healing and spiritual regeneration (Miller, 2015, pp. 307-310), and such discourses were echoed in Laing’s

concept of curative *metanoia*, a psychic rebirth that he argued was originally encountered in early Christianity, and represented through metaphors of baptism (Miller, 2009, pp. 14-18).

As a historian, I strive for ‘objectivity’ by subscribing to well-established disciplinary protocols. In particular, I follow the so-called ‘symmetry postulate’, by which questions of scientific validity and justification are suspended. This allows me to foreground other explanations for the adoption of psychotherapeutic ideas and practices, including a wide variety of economic, social, cultural, and psychological motives and factors. Moreover, I also eschew ‘psychohistory’, the naïve or reductive historiographic use of psychoanalytic (or psychotherapeutic) explanations that may be favoured by practitioners who pursue the history of their discipline. However, I cannot entirely separate myself from my historical time and place, one in which psychological expertise is widely disseminated and accepted. I may not write from the insider position of a Scottish psychotherapeutic practitioner keen to demonstrate that their particular doctrines emerge by an inner rational necessity. Nonetheless, a broader context of psychological ideas provides the implicit background to my historical practice, offering both fruitful hypotheses and credible explanatory models. The contentious hypothesis of a colonized and ‘inferiorist’ Scottish intellectual culture has proved heuristically useful to my work, and I have also relied upon the concept of ‘discursive bereavement’ to explain the translation of Christian discourses into psychotherapeutic form.

Symmetric versus asymmetric explanation

My research on such cultural factors as religion in the history of Scottish psychotherapy has, in the main, consciously followed the so-called ‘symmetry postulate’ (also ‘symmetry principle’). This long-standing principle in history of science was first established in the sociology of scientific knowledge, and given pre-eminent expression by David Bloor. The symmetry postulate requires that sociology of scientific knowledge should ‘be symmetrical in

its style of explanation' so that 'the same types of cause' are used to 'explain [...] true and false beliefs' (Bloor, 1991, p. 7). Bloor's important, but elliptical statement, gains clarity when contrasted with the asymmetrical style of explanation favoured in earlier histories of science:

The general structure of these explanations stands out clearly. They all divide behaviours or belief into two types: right and wrong, true or false, rational or irrational. They then invoke sociological or psychological causes to explain the negative side of the division. Such causes explain error, limitation and deviation. The positive side of the evaluative divide is quite different. Here logic, rationality and truth appear to be their own explanation. Here psycho-social causes do not need to be invoked. (Bloor, 1991, p. 9)

The symmetrical style of explanation proper to the sociology of scientific knowledge, however, offers psycho-social causes for both 'right' and 'wrong' beliefs, rather than explaining the former's social currency by their truthfulness, and the latter's by extraneous historical factors.

The symmetry postulate thereby contrasts with what might be called the everyday attitude of scientific agents, including psychotherapeutic researchers and practitioners. As a general rule, we may safely presume that psychotherapists typically hold the theory behind their practice to be valid and justifiable. Obviously, there are caveats to such a rule: practitioners may believe that theory poorly understands practice, or requires refinement or elaboration – and perhaps there is even a minority who have no belief in their method, but practise psychotherapy instead in a spirit of conscious charlatanry. Nonetheless, the typical psychotherapist adheres to the particular doctrine of their approach, be what it may (cognitive-behaviourist, existential-humanist, psychoanalytic, etc.). And, no doubt, those of us who are potential consumers of psychotherapy are ethically reassured by practitioners who believe in what they do.

The reasons for adherence to a particular psychotherapeutic body of theory and practice are surely manifold. But, regardless of the exact reasons in any particular case, the practitioner's trust in the validity of their approach presents a potential obstacle to their historiographical competence. The practitioner's natural inclination is to explain the currency of their ideas by reference to their truth and rational validity. A follower of Fairbairn might argue, for instance, that the Scottish psychoanalyst's theory of the unconscious mind grasps more readily phenomena that evade the Freudian grasp – such as the now widely-recognized moral defence, in which the abused or neglected child internalizes its own sinfulness, rather than acknowledge the yet more terrible reality of its parents' badness (Fairbairn, 2002). A Fairbairn-style therapist might then tend to offer asymmetric psycho-social explanations for the currency of rival, 'mistaken' approaches. If we ask her to explain the currency of, say, cognitive-behavioural therapy, our hypothetical practitioner may well make reference to the limited time available in professional practice, the restrictive and biomedically inflected evidentiary models that are promulgated in the health professions, and the bureaucratic fondness for therapeutic approaches that are readily translated into generalized protocols. In short, our hypothetical Fairbairn follower will (be inclined to): a) explain the fact of her belief in Fairbairn's psychoanalytic psychotherapy by its rational validity; b) explain the fact of belief by others in contradictory schools by reference to a host of economic, social, cultural, and psychological motives and factors, such as economic expediency, cultural (including professional) prejudices, and organizational functionality.

This asymmetric style is entirely appropriate in the everyday attitude of the psychotherapeutic practitioner, for Bloor's symmetry postulate is a methodological principle rather than an assault upon scientific rationality (Bloor, 1991, pp. 175-179). However, with the aid of the symmetry principle, the historian or sociologist can deliberately neglect, suspend, or bracket scientific validity and justification, in order to concentrate upon the kinds

of explanation where socio-historical reasoning gains purchase. The symmetry postulate is a productive falsification, like such concepts as ‘centre of gravity’, ‘economically rational actor’, or the ‘the square root of a negative number’. There is no absurdity in simplifying or falsifying an object to know it better. As Hans Vaihinger explains, ‘many thought-processes and thought-constructs appear to be to be consciously false assumptions, which either contradict reality or are even contradictory in themselves’ (Vaihinger, 1924, pp. xlvi-xlvii). So the historian of psychotherapy may proceed *as if* disciplinary validity has no part to play in the explanation of why certain theories and practices are adopted. Thus, as a historian of Scottish psychotherapy, rather than a practitioner, I explain the fact of belief in psychotherapy by reference to non-rational factors, including economic, cultural, organizational, societal, and psychological causes. With regard to the distinctive schools of Scottish psychotherapy, I argue that these causes include: a context of Christianized evolutionary theory and sociology that operated as a philosophical customs point for Freudian ideas; the ethical authority and social ambition of twentieth-century organizational Christianity; and the appeal of preserving Christian discursive patterns, including Christian life narratives (Miller, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2015).

Against (and for) ‘psychohistory’

The symmetry principle tends to distance the academic historian of psychotherapy from the practitioner. Even where these roles are combined in a single person, performance of each seems to have quite different requirements. This separation of historian from psychotherapist is intensified by the former’s aversion to ‘psychohistory’, which is regarded by academics as the naïve and reductive historiographic application by practitioners of their favoured psychological (and often psychotherapeutic) concepts. The explanatory ambitions of psychohistory are currently realised by The Association for Psychohistory and the periodical it has produced since 1976, *The Journal of Psychohistory* (<http://psychohistory.com/the->

journal-of-psychohistory). Readers will find in recent abstracts of the journal a variety of psychologized explanations of historical phenomena. The election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016, for instance, has provoked psychohistorical explanation of the man, his electoral appeal, and the consequences of his success, with the invocation of such concepts as narcissism, denial, and splitting. Other recent articles show a particular interest in the explanatory power of trauma, both in the individual – particularly in childhood – and in an entire community across generations.

As well as following the symmetry postulate, I have therefore tried to avoid the practitioner categories of psychohistory, particularly with application to Scottish culture. The flexible psychohistorical doctrine of intergenerational trauma does not yet seem to have gained much currency in Scottish historiography. However, other practitioner-led psychohistorical narratives have gained credence in recent years, despite their deficient academic standing. The counsellor and trainer Carol Craig diagnoses the Scots in her manifesto *The Scots' Crisis of Confidence* (2003) by using Jungian typologies. In her view, the Scottish nation is psycho-culturally distinguished by a preference for 'thinking judgement' (Craig, 2003, p. 58) and for dwelling in the 'extravert rather than the introvert world' (Craig, 2003, p. 48). The consequence is that the Scots are practical fellows with lively inquiring minds, but are emotionally illiterate and hyper-critical of themselves and others – hence their typically low self-confidence (Craig, 2003, pp. 48-49, 59). Remarkably, Craig's diagnosis led to the founding of a Centre for Confidence and Well-Being (2004-present) which received both charitable support and Scottish Executive / Scottish Government funding (<http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/>). The Centre also promoted so-called 'positive psychology', which controversially calls for the disciplined cultivation of positive emotion as a means to greater health, productivity, and social cohesion (Ehrenreich, 2009). Latterly, Craig has deprecated positive psychology, instead promoting 'well-being',

and drawing upon evolutionary psychology to explain the neoliberal recrudescence of atavistic patterns of primate dominance and submission (Craig, 2010).

The academic response to Craig's psychohistorical diagnosis and therapeutics illustrates why historians distance themselves from such practitioner-led analyses. The anthropologist A.P. Cohen dismisses Craig's account as 'misconceived theory' and a 'concoction of simplistic generalisations': 'She sees Scottish society as generalisable into a collective psyche to which she applies terms drawn from Jungian analysis, and from which she derives a deterministic culture which explains pretty well everything from economic failure to dreary conformity' (Cohen, 2004, p. 160). Yet, as much I have eschewed this particular national diagnosis and its counterparts (e.g. Miller, 2005), I cannot entirely dismiss psychohistorical analysis of Scottish culture. In *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*, Ronald Turnbull and Craig Beveridge explain that they

rely on the concept of inferiorisation, which was developed by Frantz Fanon in his account of the psycho-cultural dimension of national subordination in the Third World. Fanon argues that the native comes to internalise the message that local customs are inferior to the culture of the coloniser, a theme which runs through cultural production in the colony. (Beveridge & Turnbull, 1989, p. 1)

Beveridge and Turnbull argue that 'images of backwardness and inferiority [...] govern the Scottish intelligentsia's discourse on Scotland', a rhetoric which can be explained in their view only by 'the loss of self-belief and acceptance of the superiority of metropolitan mores engendered by the sustained and ubiquitous institutional and ideological pressures which are exerted by "core" powers on their satellites' (Beveridge & Turnbull, 1989, p. 112). The colonial status of Scotland is certainly debatable (although perhaps defensible in terms of 'internal colonisation' (Hechter, 1975)), and a rigorous social scientific investigation of Beveridge and Turnbull's thesis would indeed be daunting. Yet, as part of what might loosely be called a 'context of discovery', I have found Beveridge and Turnbull's thesis a useful spur

to historical investigation. It has encouraged me to ask what *if* Scottish intellectual life were systematically ‘inferiorist’ – what might have been overlooked? Beveridge and Turnbull’s psycho-cultural reading has thus been useful to me as a heuristic device, notwithstanding the reality of inferiorist attitudes in the Scottish population.

Implicit psychologies in academic history of psychotherapy

I may not wholly subscribe to Fanon’s analysis, and its psychological assumptions, in a Scottish context (although it does make remarkable sense of Craig’s peculiar worldview, as well as other unusual claims about Scottishness (e.g. Miller, 2004)). However, there are other areas of my work where psychological theses are implicit not merely in the creation of fruitful lines of investigation, but in the historical explanation itself. Steven Sutcliffe, following Callum Brown’s historical analysis, refers to the ‘striking response to the “discursive bereavement” (the grief at the cultural loss of religious certainties) experienced mid-century by Christians’ (Sutcliffe, 2010, p. 195) – including the radical Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927-1989). In Brown’s history of Christianity, the primary form of Christian religious life is discursive, and upon it institutional and associational forms are dependent: the believer (and often the secularised, former believer) understands him- or herself through narrative categories of ‘a life-journey, using notions of progression, improvement and personal salvation, whether within religion or opposing it’ (Brown, 2009, p. 185). Following Sutcliffe and Brown, I have delineated in my own work a cultural response whereby Scottish psychotherapy took on, and refurbished, such Christian narratives. Laing’s autobiography *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (Laing, 1998), for instance, has an implicitly Christian biographical structure arranged around a series of turning points – this is why, for instance, he encodes his radical disenchantment with conventional psychiatry as a Pauline conversion (Miller, 2012, pp. 141-142). A similar pattern is also important in the life and work of the far more obscure Scottish psychotherapist, Winifred Rushforth (1885-1983), and

in the discourses and practices of the Edinburgh-based Davidson Clinic which she directed. Rushforth and her collaborators self-consciously grafted Christian life-narrative patterns such as rebirth and miraculous healing into psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic discourse – even to the extent of seeing Providential forces at work in the founding of their organization (Miller, 2015, p. 309).

The work of Brown, and also Sutcliffe, has offered me a way of explaining the investment by some Scottish Christians in psychotherapy, even as post-war secularisation intensified: the scientific authority of psychotherapy legitimated their discursive and practical continuation of Christian life-narrative patterns to which they were deeply attached. However, it seems inescapable to me that Brown's concept of a 'discursive bereavement' (Brown, 2009, p. 184) has credibility because it draws upon a variety of implicit psychological positions. Brown's concept of a Christian life-narrative pattern clearly relies upon an implicitly cognitivist psychology. The Christian's life narrative selects and links together particular items of experience into a particular schematic pattern – such constructive activity is familiar from proto-cognitivist work such as Bartlett's famous study of memory (Bartlett, 1995), and from self-consciously 'cognitivist' psychology in the research programme given an identity by Ulrich Neisser in the 1960s (Neisser, 1967). Nor is this schematic pattern purely cognitivist in significance, for it is reflexively internalized in the way theorized by social psychologists in the constructionist school, such as Kenneth Gergen (Gergen, 1973, 1985). Brown thus refers to the 'subjectification' of Christian discourses – not just 'a personal process of subscription to often very public discourses', but also 'very private (indeed sometimes intensely secret) protocols related to those discourses' (Brown, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, Brown's concept of 'discursive bereavement' manifestly identifies feelings of 'loss' experienced by Christian subjects who have witnessed, and undergone, the 'discourse change' of secularization (Brown, 2009, p. 184). The language of 'loss' and 'bereavement'

implicitly deploys psychologized ideas of grief and mourning which have flourished over the past century or so, and transposes them to the loss of a discourse rather than a person. As Leeat Granek explains, the work of psychological experts such as Freud and Helene Deutsch has made our common-sense about grief a highly theorized psychological construct (Granek, 2010, pp. 50-54). Amongst our everyday psychologized assumptions are ‘the idea that grief is an active process that involves an intense struggle to give up the emotional attachment to the person who has been lost, and that this struggle is a process that involves time and energy on the part of those mourning’ (Granek, 2010, p. 52). Moreover, it is assumed that ‘the death of a loved person must produce a reaction in the bereaved, and that the absence of such grief is as much pathology as is extensive mourning in time and intensity’ (Granek, 2010, p. 53).

Brown’s concept of ‘discursive bereavement’ implicitly psychologizes Christianity as a social-cognitivist discourse that constructs the believer’s experience, which may be reflexively internalized in a socially constructionist manner, and which – if lost – may be the object of loss or grief in the way theorized in psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic discourses. This complex syncretism of different concepts from quite varied psychological schools (some of which may be in tension with each other) has been important in my work at an explanatory as well as heuristic level. The concept of ‘discursive bereavement’, like ‘inferiorism’, certainly gives me a sense of interesting phenomena to look out for. But it is more than simply a scaffolding that can be removed once the edifice of argument is complete. Discursive bereavement is also something which I see evidenced in the life and work of Laing, Rushforth, and others: the phenomenon seems to me real, and explicable in the ways implied by Brown’s concept. This commitment to the reality of discursive bereavement prevents me from representing it merely as a productive methodological fiction. It is not *as if* R.D. Laing were adapting psychotherapeutic materials to Christian discursive patterns in order to deal with the loss of faith that beset him in an era of secularization. That is what he

was doing and why. There is, then, no magic chalk circle into which I can retreat: I am, in my historiography of Scottish psychotherapy, implicitly endorsing – via Brown’s concept – social cognitivist and social constructionist psychologies, as well as psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic accounts of attachment, loss, and mourning.

Conclusion

Given that my procedures of discovery and explanation are definitely, albeit implicitly, psychologized, I must sound a note of warning about the category ‘psychohistory’. This concept certainly can be used – against the intentions of its practitioners – to demarcate psychologizing explanations that are reductive, overambitious, mono-causal, or deprecated in some other way (e.g. by seeming to the historiographer to be implausible or unlikely). But in doing so, one must be careful not to give the impression that psychologized historical explanation is the sole domain of psychotherapeutic practitioners who are invested in the validity of their particular theory and method. A related caution applies to the symmetry postulate, and its distancing of the historian from psychological validity claims: the historian of psychotherapy may proceed *as if* psychotherapeutic validity has no part to play in the explanation of why certain theories and practices are adopted. However, the historian’s own activity will surely invoke ‘psycho-social causes’ (Bloor, 1991, p. 9) if it aims at adequacy, and thus presume the validity of various psychological school and theses. Valid methodological postulates such as the symmetry principle, and scepticism about practitioner histories, are of great value to cultural history of psychotherapy. However, they should not conceal the extent to which any contemporary researcher, myself included, is caught up always and already in a complex background of psychologized presuppositions. The contemporary historian is as psychologized as any other modern subject, including those impertinent practitioners, with their folk histories of psychotherapy. Accordingly, I at least do not know what historiography purged of psychological presuppositions would look like –

how else would I explain what Laing or Rushforth were experiencing and doing, except by using categories that I in fact hold as valid?

My particular argument here is more generally encapsulated by the historiographic recognition, post-Gadamer, that “[w]e are more subject to history than it can be subjected to consciousness. Whenever we understand, history effects the horizon, never susceptible of ultimate clarification, of everything that can appear meaningful and worth inquiring into’ (Grondin, 1994, p. 114). My practice of historical reason is itself historically and culturally situated, and so rests upon a background of pre-judgements which include any number of psychological and psychotherapeutic explanatory forms. Objectivity in this process cannot consist of simply suspending my own judgement on psychological validity claims. The symmetry postulate is appropriate for the historical agents under investigation (I do not explain their beliefs by their putative greater rational validity). But I must accept that I am continually selecting, using, and evaluating forms of psycho-social explanation that have some affinity to the psychotherapeutic discourses employed by the practitioner community that I investigate. While I oppose historical investigations that are psychologically reductive, or one-sided, or otherwise deficient, I am nonetheless entangled with psychological debates. As a psychologized subject of a psychologized era, I write history of psychotherapy that is implicitly (and at times explicitly) psychological, and which addresses a psychologized audience. My distance from the psychotherapeutic community which I examine can only ever be partial: there is no psychological ‘view from nowhere’ to which I have access.

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